



THE AGITATOR NETWORK

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NUT CONFERENCE – EASTER 2002

Bulletin for trade union and workplace activists – Produced by Workers Power supporters

TEACHER SHORTAGES, EXCESSIVE WORKLOAD Time to strike back

Conference takes place this year against the background of the continuing severe teacher shortage and a dramatic upsurge in industrial action by workers across Britain. From the rail to the post to local government workers are angry and fighting back against their employers and New Labour. Teachers, of course, have been no exception.

In London the NUT strike on 14 March was spectacularly successful. Ten thousand teachers marched through the streets of central London. The hall where the rally took place could have been filled ten times over. Unison and NASUWT members supported picket lines. Hundreds of schools were closed. Despite the best efforts of a horde of journalists was hard-pressed to find a parent to condemn the strikers.

The strike was amazing, but perhaps even more amazing is that it nearly didn't happen. The huge "yes" vote - 95% in many of the inner London areas - showed the strike was very popular. Many union members have been asking over the past year why we were not taking action as the teacher shortage, particularly in London, developed into a full-scale crisis. The turnover of teachers in Westminster is a staggering 27%. One in five teachers in Hammersmith and Fulham and one in seven in Hackney are supply teachers. And yet we waited until March this year to take action.

At an Executive meeting in January a proposal from Dave Harvey and Linda Taaffe for a day of strike action was voted down by the Executive with Tony Brockman, amongst others, speaking against. So what happened to change their minds?

A rally, called by the Camden Association, showed that there was a groundswell of feeling but even the organised left in the Socialist Teachers' Alliance fought shy of calling for immediate strike action. The insulting recommendation from the STRB proved



Teachers strike on 14 March

to be a catalyst for action.

The average cost of a modest house in Hackney is currently running at £181,000. Recently parliament voted to increase the amount of money MPs, whose constituencies are not in London, get for accommodation in the capital. They gave themselves a rise of £6,000, increasing their London allowance to £16,000. Yet the STRB report recommended teachers in inner London should get an increase of less than £2 a week on their current allowance.

The anger felt by teachers in staffrooms across London appears even to have penetrated the doors of Hamilton House. Doug McAvoy moved with surprising speed and called the ballot and strike within weeks in order to coincide with the STRB report going to parliament. But don't be fooled into thinking that our General Secretary has suddenly been converted to the value of strike

action. McAvoy has already made it clear that he doesn't want any further action. He has written to all members who were balloted to congratulate us on the action, but warning us that we must now "campaign" to persuade the government of our case and not expect any more of the "drama on 14 March". He writes that "Pressure and persuasion take many forms; not all can be strikes but all must be striking."

There is now a very real danger that the brilliant action of 14 March will become an isolated event rather than the starting signal for national strike action for better pay for all teachers, against the teacher shortage and against the excessive workload that the shortage exacerbates. Clearly, any further action will need to be taken forward by rank and file teachers in London and beyond. But that rank and file needs to get organised and swiftly.

Organise the rank and file!

The strike in London and the current lack of action nationally over the teacher shortage highlight the need for rank and file organisation in the union.

How can we win a significant increase in pay for all teachers, with no strings? We can't rely on the current union leadership. It is great that the national union moved so quickly to ballot members on this strike, but McAvoy has already shown that he has no intention of continuing the fight this year. And, under the present rules of the union we, NUT rank and file union members, do not control the action. So when we should be stepping up the action in London and spreading that action to other areas, the danger is that the right-wing leadership of the union will block that action.

In London, as a first step, we need an elected co-ordinating committee. Such a committee would keep the pressure on the union leadership, making sure further action is organised and guarding against any sell-out.

If the union leadership decides to call no further action, we will have to be prepared to take action unofficially. This action will have to be built through organising support amongst parents and other workers. Teachers are not the only workers who are finding it more and more difficult to live and work in London. We have an opportunity to link up our campaign with Unison members who are due to strike in the next few weeks in support of their own claim for an increase in the London allowance.

There is a real sense of revival in the labour movement and rank and file workers are looking at how they can take the new wave of struggles forward.

The rise in the number of strikes, in successful votes for strike action and in militancy across a number of unions is being reflected in a shift to the left at the top of the unions. The old right-wing union leaders were not doing the things that could reach out to the great mass of unorganised workers, nor were they proving to their own members that their organisations were doing enough to defend them.

In the most recent round of elections pro-strike, left-wing union leaders have begun to win in ballot after ballot. Billy Hayes and Mark Serwotka (in the CWU and PCS respectively) were written off as no-hopers. Yet both won elections by comfortable margins. Bob Crow in the RMT was the most recent victor, winning the general secretaryship of the RMT comfortably despite a massive press witch-hunt and, as it turns out, a covert operation by the TUC itself to undermine his campaign.

More and more members want fighting unions to take on the Labour government and the viciously anti-union bosses, such as those who run the train companies and now Consignia (the post office). The election of new left leaders symbolises the anger of the rank and file

The first task of a new rank and file movement is to rebuild the traditions of solidarity lost during the years of defeat. It will also need to organise strike committees capable of controlling action and preventing it being undermined by McAvoy and company.

It must fight to break the grip of the bureaucrats by winning the right to hold regular elections, recall elected leaders and ensure that all officials are only paid the average wage of the workers they represent.

It must breathe new life into the unions by transforming their structures into democratic, vibrant ones that can enthuse and mobilise the members. Above all it must force the unions to reach out and organise the unorganised.

The tasks of a rank and file movement today, however, go far beyond these trade union questions. With Labour in office there is a growing mood in the unions to punish it for its policies of privatisation, of maintaining and even talking of extending, the anti-union laws for its pro-business agenda.

Billy Hayes of the CWU has threatened to withhold money from Labour, John Edmonds has actually cut funding to the party. The fire-fighters' union, the FBU, agreed last year to open up its political fund to working class organisations other than the Labour Party. Unison members voted to review the use of their political fund to bank roll Labour.

This campaign on the political fund – which was pushed forward by the recent Socialist Alliance trade union conference – raises an urgent question for any rank and file movement: what should replace Labour? We are against non-political trade unionism, too typi-

cal of our own union, and we are for the democratisation of the political fund. But if we win the battle to democratise it, what is the alternative to Labour?

A new rank and file movement would have to thrash out an answer – one we believe lies in building a new party, a working class alternative to Labour. For us such an alternative must not be a re-run of Labour (100 years of trying to reform a system that puts profit before human need). It must be a total alternative to it, a revolutionary party that organises the working class to smash the capitalist system and the state that defends it.

This view may well be a minority one at the moment, but a rank and file movement will soon find itself – as it should – organising international solidarity with workers in places like Argentina, who have no alternative but to revolt against the system.

It will find itself shoulder to shoulder with militant anti-capitalist youth as they brave ranks of riot cops to storm the gatherings of the global rulers and bosses whose policies and institutions govern every aspect of our lives. In other words, the rank and file movement we need today must begin as an anti-capitalist rank and file movement as well as an anti-bureaucratic one. It must campaign against Labour and confront the question of what alternative party we need.

The potential for revolutionary ideas to spread in such a movement is enormous. The Agitator exists to help them spread. Sign up to our network and come to the public meeting advertised on the opposite page.

THE AGITATOR NETWORK The Agitator wants to advertise and build solidarity for all workplace and trade union struggles – please send your stories in. Tel: 020-7793 1468 or email: agitator@workerspower.com

that is manifest in the recent strikes that have taken place on the rail, in the civil service and, of course, in London schools.

But should militants just rely on new leaders? Can the NUT be transformed simply by electing some leading figure from the STA or CDFU? These new general secretaries may be a lot better than the old ones, but they are still subjected to enormous pressures – not only from the bosses but from within the huge bureaucracy that dominates the trade unions.

They are still tied down by all sorts of rules and regulations that are stacked in favour of the right wing. Above all, they are not fully accountable to their members, for the simple reason that in the trade union movement real rank and file democracy does not exist. Most decisions are in the hands of the full-time officials – cru-

cially, decisions over action.

What is the best way of avoiding a new round of defeats and of seeing the new left leaders incorporated into the bureaucratic machines that do so much to break the fighting spirit of the union members?

The key is organising rank and file members into permanent fighting organisations. These would hold their leaders to account and replace them – even the most left-wing ones – when they either sell-out or fail to stop the right selling out, and transform the unions themselves into effective, militant and democratic organisations controlled by the members themselves.

For NUT members, given the current tasks of spreading the strike action and launching a national fight against teacher shortages, such organisation is vital. The 14 March strike has opened up an opportunity which we need to grasp with both hands.

Striking lessons

The strike on 14 March was the first all London teachers strike since the 1970s. This led to many new teachers having to discover the ABC of striking and older hands having to undergo a rapid refresher course. Unfortunately some were very sadly out of practice. This became clear when school groups discussed what they planned to do on the day, whether to have picket lines, who to picket out etc.

Picket lines serve a variety of functions, obviously the most important being to ensure that no union member scabs (a word rarely heard in the genteel circles that now control our union). But as well as this it allows other workers to show solidarity with our cause and is therefore extremely useful to rebuild the idea that an injury to one is an injury to all.

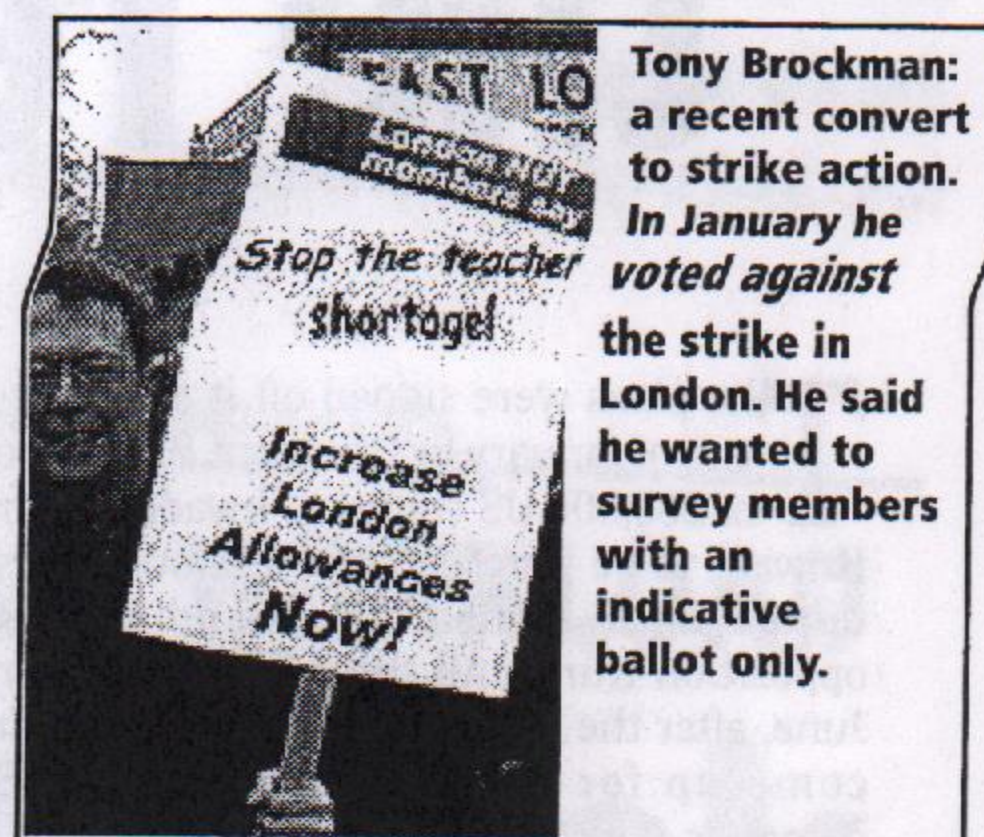
Such solidarity will be vital when groups of workers in smaller unions (or unions with less members in a workplace) want to take action. This is extremely likely in the current climate with the raft of claims now in

regarding London Weighting.

Without an agreement not to cross picket lines workers in UNISON, the T&G, etc will find it virtually impossible to shut their place of work. Knowing that other workers will honour their picket line will encourage them to fight for better conditions even though they are smaller in numbers.

In spite of this, people obviously including WORKERS POWER supporters, who have argued for picket lines have found themselves accused of a series of crimes. Most pathetically we are accused of making people feel uncomfortable or awkward. There are apparently members who are scared of their head teacher but don't want to cross a picket line. To 'help' these people out of their dilemma we are told NOT to have a picket line, let them go to work, get paid for doing nothing (except being a scab) and then everybody will feel better!

We are also apparently guilty of targeting low paid workers like office staff and dinner ladies when



in fact our main thrust has been to stop teachers who will directly benefit from any increase in London Weighting. Obviously we would like other school workers to support us (in fact we are in favour of all education workers being in one union, but realise such links will take time to build).

If these arguments were being put about by McAvoy and his cronies it would be bad enough, but in fact they are being used by supporters of the main left group in the union, the Socialist Teachers Alliance. Initially we thought that there had been an outbreak of liberalism but recently all became clear. McAvoy had sent out a circular to all Div Secs saying that there were to be no picket lines. In Greenwich, where the local association had put out a leaflet advising school groups to set up picket lines, McAvoy's letter was sent to every single NUT member!

The STA leadership have clearly decided not to do anything that might upset McAvoy and his supporters on the Executive. Now this is a political strategy and should have been argued as such, rather than attempting to smear other activists in the way they have done.

Workers Power believes that simply going along with the likes of McAvoy and his cronies (the same people who have misled and sold us out for years) will not provide the action needed to take on the Government and win. To do that we will need a conscious rank and file organisation that sees the independent organisation of classroom teachers able to take action when the bureaucrats try and stop it.

the agitator NATIONAL MEETING

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Washington-London: the real axis of evil

The plans were signed off it seems at the end of January by President Bush. A force of 200,000 US troops to invade Iraq from Kuwait, to be preceded by ferocious and sustained aerial bombardment and arming of opposition Kurds. All this possibly as soon as June, after the UN sanctions against Iraq have come up for assessment and the USA's demands for complete opening up of Iraq to their inspectors have inevitably and justifiably been turned down.

Of course, no evidence exists that Iraq was in any way linked with the September 11 attack on New York and Washington or that Baghdad has ties with al-Qaida. So the "war against terrorism" has been broadened to a "war against those who hold weapons of mass destruction" (other than those the US approves of).

Bush has made it clear that they do not appeal to international law or the "international community" (i.e. the United Nations) to legitimise such a war, nor will they seek prior political approval from European, Russian or Middle Eastern members of the imperialist-led coalition against Afghanistan before they bomb Iraq flat.

The US imperial power looks only to its "national interest" in launching such an attack; that is the interests of US big business that own the politicians who run the government and seek to make the world a safer place to make profits, buy up firms, access raw materials and prop up pliant regional governments.

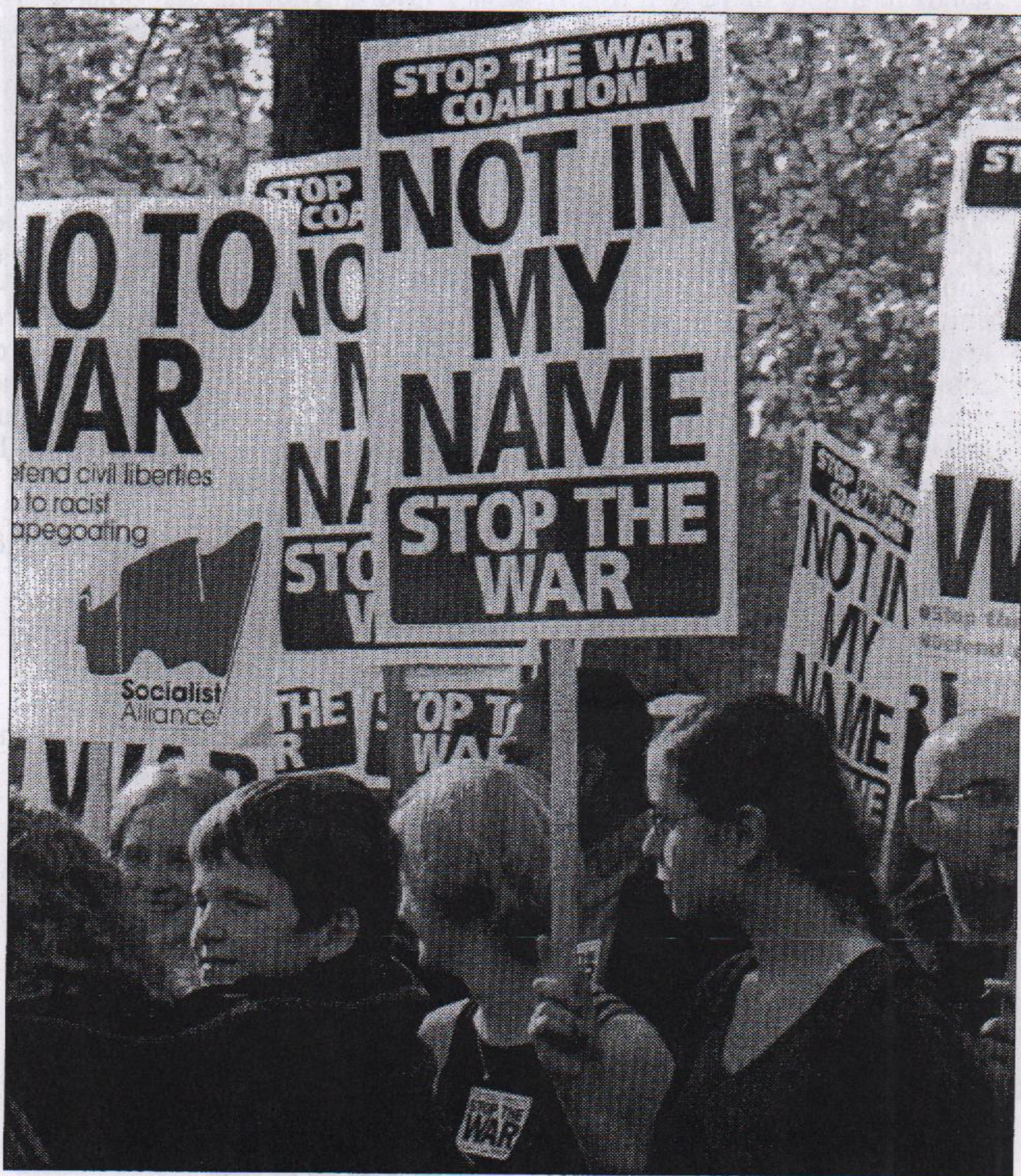
Iraq is not one of the latter; it is an enemy of Israel, it backs the Palestinians - even if for Saddam's own narrow reasons. Iraq refuses to accept US leadership in running the world. So it must be brought to heel. Saddam must be overthrown.

The USA has overtly rejected the idea of the sovereignty of nations and rejection of outside aggression, which underpinned the creation of the UN and post-war post-Nazi world bourgeois imperialist order. In is the idea that the United States reserves to itself the right to determine which states, which governments serve its global ambitions. The US reserves the right to unseat leaders and uproot governments.

Bush's new military budget is \$396 billion, an increase of \$48 billion over the already unexpectedly high 2001 budget. The increase alone is larger than any other nation on earth's total military budget. The total is higher than the next 19 nations' defence budgets put together.

This symbolises the overwhelming military might and superiority of US imperialism, and underpins the arrogance and unilateralism of its actions.

The "opposition" of the EU powers and the Arab world to the USA's unilateral imposition of its law on Afghanistan proved so feeble or non-existent that this has encouraged the hawks to



press for action against Iraq. Bush's state of the union speech has forced the architects of European Union foreign policy - France, Patten and Solana - to condemn Bush for his "simplistic approach" and especially for his aggression towards Iran. Putin and the Arab states have made it clear that they cannot support the idea of an attack on Iraq.

The European imperialist powers are increasingly aware of the fact that the US offensive also challenges their sphere of influence in the semi-colonial world. While the US has ceded the Balkans to the EU there are growing conflicts over Israel. Given the USA's hegemony these can only be articulated to a limited extent and the fact that there remains no unified EU foreign policy (thanks above all to Britain's slavishness towards the USA) inhibits the effectiveness of any European challenge to the US.

In these circumstances the US can and does

dismiss the objections of "its allies" knowing they have neither the military might or political unity to do anything to stop the US.

The axis of evil is now clear; it is found in Washington and runs from the Pentagon through the White House and Congress and across the Atlantic to Downing Street.

Only mass, united resistance from the world's workers, urban poor and small farmers, from those denied national self-determination and struggling to achieve it, can stop the US in its tracks.

Only mass demonstrations crucially in the Gulf states, Pakistan and Turkey can knock these plans off course, and make the US administration realise the overhead costs of war against Iraq will be civil wars and revolutionary uprisings in the region and mass anti-war movements in the US and Europe.

- Stop Bush and Blair's war drive!
- Hands off Iraq!